THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Friends
February 27, 2000
John M. Buchanan

God's love is visionary, perceiving behind the armor most of us don almost the moment we are out of diapers an individual unprecedented and irrepeatable. And God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it. Christians recognize their value as a gift rather than an achievement: it is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value.

William Sloane Coffin
The Courage to Love

FOURTH
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CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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FRIENDS

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

February 27, 2000
Psalm 103
Mark 2: 1-12

Dear God, it is such a privilege to be here this morning—together. We come as individuals and in our worship, our praying and singing and listening and thinking—we become a people—your people. We thank you for that—for calling us out of our separateness, our isolation, our loneliness—to be together in your love. Startle us now with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your word, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Doug Loving, Presbyterian Minister, Linda Loving's brother, wrote recently in *The Christian Century* about the healing power of friendship. Doug remembers the day he received the diagnosis from his physician that he had the same rare liver disease as Walter Payton. The doctor told him that due to a shortage of donors, about one-third of those needing a liver transplant actually receive them. The others die.

Doug reflects, "In the aftermath of that nearly paralyzing news, I was awed to find spiritual companions gathering around me, bringing great blessing. . . .Their faithfulness lifted me, carried me toward the healer when I couldn't find my way alone . . .Many folks joined in continuing prayers . . they have buoyed me up and continue to transport me into the transforming presence and healing power of Christ." (*The Christian Century,* 2/2-9/2000, p. 117)

Doug's doing well, by the way. I just sat near him at a Chicago Symphony concert two weeks ago. His ministry is going well and he and Mary are busy conspiring to find more ways to spend time with a wonderful new grandchild. But he's an honest and faithful man and referring to his friends and to the story about the paralyzed man and his four friends, Doug says: "My friends' faithfulness has helped me experience a reality that I suspect the paralyzed man discovered as well. Even without being free of physical disease, we are offered God's transformative gift of love that can mean more than healthy bodies."

One time a man who was paralyzed was given his life back because he had four very good friends who knew what they had to do for him and did it.

Jesus has returned to Capernaum, Peter's home town, where he began his ministry and where there was a small house which served as his home. He had healed a man with an unclean spirit—we'd say he was mentally ill—in the Capernaum Synagogue. He had lifted Peter's mother-in-law from her sick bed. He had dramatically touched a man with leprosy and declared that the man was clean. Word spread like wild-fire. Everyone heard about

the healer from Capernaum. Now the whole village, it seemed, was crowded into the street in front of the little house. People brought their sick ones, the frail elderly, the lame, the babies.

The picture Mark gives us of that day is unusually vivid. In the midst of this poignantly human scene, the crowded house and street, the lame and sick, the families bringing their loved ones, and in the midst of it all, four people carried their friend who was paralyzed on his mat. But there were so many people crowded into the house where Jesus was speaking, spilling out the door and filling the street, that the four couldn't get close with their awkward burden. And so, undeterred, they carried him up the outside stairway to the roof of the adobe house and there they did something truly amazing. They dug a hole in the roof. The text says "they removed the roof," but the roof, people who know about these things, assure us, was not removable. It was made of a kind of adobe mud, plastered between wooden beams. So they dug right through—a big hole—big enough to lower their paralyzed friend down, right into the middle of the crowd, right to the feet of Jesus.

This is a good story. I've always wondered what the owner of the house was thinking as his roof was being destroyed. Jesus responds to all of this in a most curious way. Mark says that when Jesus saw "their faith,"—the faith of the four friends, that is, he said to the man "your sins are forgiven," which was not exactly what the faithful friends had in mind, but it did irritate a group of scribes, religious officials who were observing this peculiar drama. He was presuming quite a bit, actually—presuming to do what only God can do—sounds like blasphemy, actually. He had already assumed for himself the priestly authority to declare that a man with leprosy was clean. Now he was presuming on the very authenticity of God.

Jesus acknowledges their discomfort; challenges them, asks a rhetorical question and then, almost as an after thought, says it—"Take up your mat and go home," which the man does.

There is a lot going on here. The part of the story that strikes me first is about friendship—those four friends who are strong, focused, determined, persistent, who know what they have to do to get their friend some help, and do it. I'm intrigued that Jesus pays more attention to them than the man on the mat; doesn't say anything about his faith or lack of it, but when he sees what the friends have done, calls that 'faith.' I'm intrigued with the thought that when you're weak and vulnerable and paralyzed in body and maybe even in spirit, having friends can save your life; that even when you can't or don't believe, having friends who do, can give your life back.

There is life-giving power in friendship, and grace. I love something Ellen Goodman wrote about it one time:

> "We are friends. We cook for each other. We hold parties for each other's birthdays, promotions, pregnancies. We spend dozens of Saturday nights and occasional weekends together. Our children call us by first names. We are remembered when they say prayers or sell raffle tickets."

Goodman thinks friendship is so important that we all need to be much more intentional about it—making friends, inviting friendship, taking time for friendship, celebrating friendship, practicing friendship. It takes a commitment because life has changed. Friendship is more difficult, more complicated, more elusive and therefore more rare than at any time in our history.

One reason is mobility. As America has become more mobile—something like one out of four of us moves every year, and permanence becomes more rare—everybody is from somewhere else, and therefore childhood friends are far away and mostly forgotten—adult friendship starts later and becomes more difficult. As a matter of fact, the reality of mobility, the knowledge that I'm not here permanently, has a powerful negative impact on friendship. W. Paul Jones writes, "Anticipating the next job change or move across the country, people withhold themselves from potentially deep relationships. 'It hurts too much when I have to leave,'" they say.(*Weavings,* May/June 1992, "Friendship and Circles of Commitment." P. 38)

In addition, the cultural climate that celebrates and holds up as an ideal, individualism, autonomy, independence—moves us in the opposite direction from friendship. "We need to go it alone, thank you very much. We will deal with our problems alone, thank you. We can resolve this thing ourselves, or by my self, without involving anyone else, without revealing our thoughts and feelings. We/I can do it alone!" Anthropologist Margaret Mead said that American mobility—plus American individualism, created a brand new anthropological reality called the "nuclear family" or "nuclear marriage": separated from extended family and traditional neighborhoods and friends, self contained, autonomous, trying to stand alone—independently—husband and wife relying exclusively on the other—for fulfillment; mothers and fathers relying exclusively on themselves for parenting. It's not working very well, Meade pointed out. The nuclear family, she said, is a new invention and not a particularly good one.

Market analyst Faith Popcorn gave us a new word to describe the tenor of the time. "Cocooning"—retreating to the safety of home, pulling down the blinds, plumping the pillows, putting a rented video in rather than going to a theater, a frozen Wolfgang Puck gourmet meal in the microwave—rather than bothering with the inconvenience of a restaurant. And now, all your shopping needs and communication requirements, banking and travel arrangements can be accomplished in a people-free environment on your personal computer.

Even religion feels the effect. Television can bring you all the dimensions of church—worship, music, inspiration, challenge—bring it all without the nuisance of dealing other people. Sociologist Robert *Bellah*, in *Habits of the Heart*, identified a new strain of radical individualism among young Americans; religion without other people, utterly private spirituality. One of his interviewees, Sheila Larson, has become famous for telling Bellah that she considered herself very religious, but felt no need to go to church. She put it this way: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."

Stephen Ambrose, whose account of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and World War II books, *D. Day, Eisenhower and His Boys, Band of Brothers,* have kept him consistently on the best seller list, is no shrinking violet. One of the themes that emerges in his books is friendship among men—mostly because of the subject matter.

And so Ambrose has written a book about it. *Comrades*, an account of famous friendships. He reflects, "Friendship among men is difficult for Anglo-Saxon males of a middle class background. I was well into my fifties before I discovered the pleasure of hugging a male friend. Now I do it habitually. General Dwight Eisenhower wrote at the end of his life that he regretted his inability to give hugs to his fellows." (Introduction, *Comrades*).

Ambrose defines friendship as different from other human relationships, free of jealousy, criticism and resentment. "Friends glory in each other's successes and are downcast by their failures. Friends minister to each other (an interesting choice of words), nurse each other, give to each other, worry about each other, stand always ready to help." (p. 106)

In a powerful account of the friendship in a military unit, Easy Company, which experienced the entire action, from D-Day to the German surrender, Ambrose tells about Private Ken Webster, who was wounded and instead of returning to the United States, insisted on returning to his unit, to danger, suffering and possible death. For Webster and thousands like him, the gift of friendship was worth everything in the world.

When we were young parents, still in our early twenties, we moved to a community where we didn't know a soul. In our neighborhood, we were the youngest people by at least fifteen years. We were, in addition, 500 miles from family and friends and feeling a little isolated. We had the great good fortune to move into a house beside Nate and Art, a couple in their 40's, who had no children of their own, and who immediately extended to us the gift of friendship. An occasional cup of coffee, a kind inquiry about a sick child, an offer of help with a reluctant oil furnace; we were the recipients of a unique gift which we now understand to have been life giving. When it came time to add a garage to the tiny manse, Art who at that time was not a church member, although later he and Nate joined and became pillars, offered to build it and to teach me how—and we did it together. When a new baby arrived ahead of schedule and I was not home, it was Art and Nate who provided ambulance service to the hospital. When our first Thanksgiving away from home and our families approached, we talked about it and invited them to dinner and even though they had families, they came and shared Thanksgiving dinner with us. We were alone, strangers, aliens almost. And they blessed us with the grace of adult friendship.

Friendship gives life. Part of what a church is for, I think, is to provide access to the spiritual life giving power of friendship. Part of why we worship corporately is that together we can affirm, and trust and believe and give our hearts in ways that any one of us on any given Sunday may not be able to. I think it was Dostoyevsky who said that when he could not believe, he went to church and in the congregations' singing his unbelief was gathered up in the belief of the people and that he was carried along by the faith of his friends. When we pray together, we are always praying on behalf of those among us who, for whatever reason, are not able to pray this morning. When we sing, we

carry with us those who are down, unable to sing, perhaps unable to do much of anything. When we stand and say together "I believe in God the Father Almighty," we are believing for those who today have no belief left, who are dry and tired and spiritually burned out. When we give, we give also for those who cannot.

Friendship heals. Four friends carried a paralyzed comrade to Jesus. When Doug was diagnosed, he was awed by the experience of being lifted, carried toward the healer by faithful friends. And he reflects that when his congregation started a prayer chain, he and his people were amazed at the results.

"I'm praying for you," we say to one another, sometimes tentatively; sometimes we don't say it because it sounds intrusive, or too pious. But when people have said, "I'm praying for you," to me, and I knew it to be true, I have found it to be a powerful experience. It is, I believe, a way of helping one another, holding one another up when we're not sure we can manage alone, propping us up emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Those times come to every one of us.

Anne Lamott's wonderful metaphor is true—the world sometimes seems like the waiting room to the Emergency Ward. And those who are mostly okay for now need to take the tenderest care of the more wounded people in the waiting room until the healer comes. You sit with people . . . you bring them juice and graham crackers. (*Traveling Mercies,* p.106)

The healer has come. Jesus Christ is his name. It is the greatest privilege to be able to carry one another into his presence and it is the most amazing grace, when we can't quite make it alone, to be lifted up, held up, carried into his presence by strong arms and loving hands and faithful prayers. -Worship

Friendship. Thanks be to God. Amen.